



Book review:

**MULTIPLE POPULISMS: ITALY AS DEMOCRACY'S
MIRROR**

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At the latest Republican Convention in August 2020, Ivanka Trump defined her father as “people’s President”. Appeals to the people are a typical feature of populism, and Trump is only one of the many populist leaders that have climbed up the ladder of political power in the last decade. Therefore, Anselmi and Blokker’s edited book published by Routledge in 2020 represents a timely contribution to the topical theme of populism. This volume provides the theoretical tools and empirical examples to better grasp current events, such as the 2020 US presidential race as well as populist leaders’ response to the Covid-19 pandemic. The volume perfectly fits the authors wider research agenda, investigating the phenomenon of populism from a political sociological point of view. The contributing authors are leading scholars in the field of populism, and enrich the book with analyses deeply grounded in their own areas of expertise

To compile an edited book on populism is a challenging task, given the copious amount of scholarly attention devoted to the topic and the magnitude of it. However, the authors commendably rise to the challenge, thanks to an original approach to the topic which strikes for its interdisciplinarity, bridging gaps between Political Sociology, Political Theory, and Comparative Politics. Multiple Populisms does not provide a textbook approach to populism, delineating the history of the phenomenon, its different manifestations, causes and effects. Instead, Multiple Populisms provides the food for thought to stimulate a cross-disciplinary examination of the relations between populism and political philosophical concepts, the public sphere, and institutions. The volume analyses Italy’s populism from the 1990s to today, shedding light on Forza Italia’s and the Lega’s right-wing populism, but also Matteo Renzi’s left-wing populism, and the Movimento 5 Stelle’s (M5S) post-ideological populism. Although

the case study is focussed onto Italy, its insights are applicable to populisms in other countries displaying tendencies such as anti-politics, depoliticization, anti-partyism, legal resentment, and techno-populism.

The contributing authors adopt a plethora of different methods to provide evidence shaping their arguments. The common thread running through the chapters is that populism interacts with and shapes democracy, political parties, the intellectuals, the constitution, and criminal law. The book's style is crisp and succinct, useful to effectively convey information both to the academic public and to students being initiated to the topic. The book is divided logically into four main parts, starting with laying the foundation of the analysis through conceptual definition, then focusing on the objects of the antagonism of populism, before delving into the relationship between populism and the public sphere and populism and institutions constituting the pillars of the state.

In the introduction, the authors offer a thorough and sharp review of what they intend by populism. Following Mudde's argument that populism represents a pathological normalcy instead of a normal pathology, the authors state that populism is not 'a pathological phenomenon' (p. 1) but a 'multi-faceted condition, which involves the redefinition of some of the essential characteristic of democracy, such as participation, representation and political conflict' (p. 2). The authors' definition of populism as an appeal to the people against the elected establishment has the advantage of encompassing diverse types of populism, including left- and right-wing populism, thus accounting for the 'multiple populisms' recurring in Italian political history. The authors avoid the straitjacket of encasing populism within one distinct approach (or a combination thereof), focussing on ideology, discourse, and/or strategy. The result is a dynamic account of populism escaping any essentialist reductionism.

While the book does not privilege a historical account of populism, the origins of the concept of the people are illustrated by Pazé, going back to Aristotle and to the origins of the Italian Republic. Morlino and Raniolo's chapter on neo-populism argues that recent forms of populism enact a subversion of the quality of democracy. The subversion of democracy through populism can take on an inclusive or exclusive form, and is rooted in a range of causes, including the economic crisis, immigration, and cultural change.

As populism is often framed as a Manichean conflict between the people and the elites, or the people and dangerous Others, it is useful to understand not only what populism stands for and what it does to democracy, but also what populism is against. To understand this concept, De Nardis, Urbinati, Ragazzoni, and Viviani analyse the adversarial position of populism vis-a-vis politics, in particular through anti-politics and de-politicisation (De Nardis, Viviani), and anti-partyism (Urbinati, Ragazzoni). The hostility against politics and political parties brings to the surface a paradox inherent to populism: populists are themselves political parties operating within the political arena, despite picturing themselves as outsiders. As Urbinati demonstrates, anti-establishmentarianism is not a novel phenomenon, but has been a recurrent feature in Italian politics.

Populism is embedded within the Italian political system and, as such, it has to engage with the public sphere and political institutions. De Blasio and Sorice's chapter on techno-populism explores online opportunity structures offered to populism and perfectly fits the Italian focus of the book, as the Italian Movimento 5 Stelle M5S is a pioneer of e-democracy. The apparent strain between populism and new technological instruments is paralleled by the tension, combined with collaboration, between populism and intellectuals, which Panarari explains. The following chapter by Anastasia and Anselmi on penal populism is an unusual but welcome

element to find in most texts on populism and is very timely nowadays, when in the Covi-19 crisis populist parties are deeply imbricated with law and order and with the management of immigration.

Populism has a transformative ethos. Damiani deals with the hyper-representation offered by populist parties, which sits in an awkward relationship with anti-establishmentarianism. Later, Blokker engages with an understudied topic: the presence of populist constitutionalism and the tension between the latter and the Constitution. The relationship between populism and constitutionalism is urgent to study, especially after the Lega and the M5S formed a populist coalition government between 2018 and 2019. This topical theme is also the object of study of one of the latest additions to the literature on populism: the volume *Italian Populism and Constitutional Law: Strategies, Conflicts and Dilemmas* (Giacomo Delledonne, Giuseppe Martinico, Matteo Monti, Fabio Pacini 2020). Biancalana wraps up this extraordinary thought-provoking series of chapters by distilling four kinds of populism that have peppered Italian history since the fall of the first Republic in 1992.

Italy, therefore, really appears as a “breeding ground for populism” (p. 216), demonstrated by the variety of populisms that have altered Italian democracy, evolved into a form of technopopulism and penal populism, and interacted with the Italian Constitution. Although it is a unique case of a populist coalition government in Western Europe, Italy can be used as a paradigmatic case one can draw lessons from on the deep interrelationships between populist parties and democracy, technocracy, penal law, representation, the Constitution, and the party system.

This book constitutes an insightful addition to the literature not only on populism, but also on Italian politics. It has the merit of approaching a well-worn topic from an original interdisciplinary angle. This volume also distinguishes itself for its courageous choice of zooming onto the paradigmatic case study of Italy, thus enriching the so-far limited collection of books devoted exclusively to Italian populism.



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